DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 428 CS 014 484

AUTHOR Hamston, Julie Ann
TITLE Investment in Literacy: A Profile of Boys and Parents Committed to the Development and Maintenance of Reading Practices.
PUB DATE 2001-06-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, July 12-15, 2001). Project conducted by Julie Ann Hamston and Kristina Love.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.cdesign.com.au/aate/aate_papers/043_hamston .htm.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Family Environment; *Literacy; *Males; Mothers; *Parent Participation; Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; *Reading Motivation; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the first stage of a research project on the topic of boys (aged 11-17) and literacy and the mediating role that families play in building interpersonal relations around reading and guiding boys into a broad range of literacy practices in the home. Findings from this research will inform a comparative study of boys identified as reluctant readers, to be conducted in 2001. Of particular interest to educators is the body of research that focuses attention on a deficit model of boys and reading. The research highlights the investment made by parents, mothers in particular, in ensuring that sharing reading practices through and across a broad range of texts, within the dominion of the family, has helped to construct boys as committed and successful readers. The research also points to the boys' appropriation of the tacit and explicit guidance in reading they have received from their parents. (Contains 20 references and a table of data.) (Author/RS)

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ED 456 428

INVESTMENT IN LITERACY: A PROFILE OF BOYS AND PARENTS COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF READING PRACTICES

Julie Ann.Hamston
University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria

Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (Hobart,Tasmania, Australia, July 12-15 2001)

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines Stage 1 of a research project conducted by Julie Hamston and Kristina Love into boys and literacy and the mediating role that families play in building interpersonal relations around reading and guiding boys into a broad range of literacy practices in the home. Findings from this research will inform a comparative study of boys identified as reluctant readers, to be conducted in 2001.

Of particular interest to educators is the body of research that focuses attention on a deficit model of boys and reading. Our research highlights the investment made by parents, mothers in particular, in ensuring that sharing reading practices through and across a broad range of texts, within the dominion of the family, has helped to construct boys as committed and successful readers. The research also points to the boys' appropriation of the tacit and explicit guidance in reading they have received from their parents.

KEY WORDS

Reading; committed; reading practices; parents; guided

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INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines Stage 1 of research into boys and reading (Hamston and Love 2000; Love and Hamston 2001). It focuses on an analysis of boys (aged 11-17) identified as good and committed readers (Millard 1997) and the types of leisure-time reading they engage in. Further, it explores the role the parents have played in the enculturation of their sons into reading practices in the home.

Stage 2 of the research (currently in progress), investigates boys from the same school who are reluctant readers; that is, boys who can read, but choose not to (Chambers 1969). Importantly, here, we aim to investigate why some boys choose not to read, in spite of similarity in what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as the habitus- a system of shared social dispositions. We are keen to elicit those factors that contribute to the choice not to read, when linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) are clearly evident. It is hoped that data from both stages of this research will contribute to the growing body of research on boys and literacy.

Importantly, it is anticipated that the research (i) counteracts what may be perceived as a deficit model of boys and literacy (see Bunbury 1995; c.f. Office for Standards in Education 1993; Thomson 1987) (ii) assists educators to see the types of intricate practices that take place in homes around shared reading events and (iii) creates a dialogue about what motivates boys, who may necessarily be guided in similar ways in the home to take on different orientations to reading.

Mapping the terrain: the research thus far

Stage 1 of the research seeks to identify how boys identified as good and committed readers see themselves as readers and how they describe the kinds of reading practices that are shared in their homes. As such, it builds on the profile of boys and readers portrayed in Rhonda Bunbury's 1995 report 'Children's Choice'. Further, it extends Bunbury's study in investigating a range of reading practices (including that of electronic

media) and focuses on boys from one school in depth. Thus, as a case study of boys in Years 5 to 11, the research aims for a detailed 'portrait' that may be applied to boys in other school communities.

Further, Stage 1 of the research works to build upon the extensive research conducted into family literacy practices (Barton et al 2000; Cairney and Ruge 1998; Heath, 1983; Spreadbury, 1995; Wells, 1986). Importantly, it works with the findings from seminal studies such as those conducted by Heath (1983) and Wells (1986) into the ways parents support children, as 'cultural members' (Heath 1989, cited in Rogoff et al 1993), to become readers.

The Study

The research took place in a private, boys' school in Melbourne and resulted from our response to concerns expressed by the Head of English regarding maintaining all boys' interest and motivation in reading. We suggested that there would be much to learn from boys who are committed to reading and so we initiated the implementation of a comprehensive questionnaire to ascertain how the boys identify themselves as readers and why; what the boys read and why; and who they share their reading with. The questionnaire was completed by 91 boys from Years 5-11. Additionally, questionnaires were administered to the parents of these boys (a total of 54 responses). These questionnaires elicited information about the parents' reading practices; how they saw their son as a reader; and the types of shared reading practices they engaged in with their son. Much space was afforded on the questionnaires to the completion of detailed discursive comments.

Data from both phases have been analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Statistical measurement has been undertaken in relation to features such as: how the boys see themselves as a reader; the frequency of reading done by each cohort of boys and their

parents; and the types and range of materials read by each cohort. Two different heuristic devices have applied to the discursive data. For the analysis of the boys' discursive comments, a template for reading as a social practice was applied (Freebody and Luke 1990; Luke 1995) to ascertain what reading practices the boys engaged in and how they viewed reading as a shared, social practice. In analyzing the ways that parents have enculturated the boys into reading practices, Barbara Rogoff's concept of guided participation (1995; Rogoff et al 1993) has been utilised (Hamston and Love forthcoming).

DISCUSSION

A 'snapshot' of the boys as readers

Patterns from the data revealed that

- the boys read widely across text types
- the boys reported an increased engagement in 'masculinised' reading practices (the Internet, CD ROM, computer games) as they matured
- mothers continued to play a strong role in maintaining shared reading practices
- fathers increasingly took on the role of sharing reading as the boys matured

Of interest, were the number of reported instances of inter-generational support (aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers) given to the boys.

More particularly, the 'template' of reading as a social practice offered by Luke (1995, after Freebody and Luke 1990) captures the multiplicity of strategies, contexts and purposes that able and empowered readers require to navigate their way around a textually-oriented world. Thus, this 'template' was selected as an appropriate lense through which the boys' comments about their reading practices could be viewed. The analysis of the boys' discursive comments in relation to four tiers of reading practice: coding practice; semantic practice; pragmatic practice; critical practice revealed that the boys were able to describe their leisure-time reading and the range of texts they engaged in articulately. Their descriptions of what they brought to and from this reading suggests

that they were very confident in terms of de-coding, pragmatics and semantic analysis of texts. Significantly, however, out of the many discursive comments generated by 91 participants, only three comments suggested anything that resembled a critical practice (see Hamston and Love 2000; Love and Hamston 2001 for an interpretation of this absence).

The overall picture to emerge from this analysis was that of a cohort of boys using reading as a resource; a pleasurable activity; a source of stimulation; a location of 'self'; and a means of establishing and maintaining connections with others.

A 'snapshot' of the parents as guides

Guided participation, according to Rogoff (1995) is one particular plane of analysis for the study of language as a socially mediated phenomenon. It is an interpersonal process that is underpinned by the mutual involvement of individuals and their partners participating in structured, collective activity. Rogoff et al (1993) argue that through guided participation "children, together with their caregivers and other companions, learn and extend the skills, values and knowledge of their community" (p 1). Finding support from Heath (cited in Rogoff et al 1993), we believed that the plane of guided participation could be applied to a study of how parents guided their adolescent sons and constructed them as cultural members into powerful and valued discourses of literacy. Of note, the commitment and energy often viewed as the domain of parents and younger children, was certainly evident in many of the parents' discursive comments. Rogoff et al (1993) define guided participation by the following attributes: interpersonal relationships; structured, collective activity; explicit guidance; tacit guidance; distal arrangements; and inter-generational directions. The following table is a synthesis of a comprehensive breakdown of the parents' discursive comments in line with the specific features of guided participation.

	Mother/Female Guardian	Father/Male Guardian
Interpersonal (including that initiated by the boy	39	23
Limited Interpersonal Relations	8	8
Structured, Collective Activity	18	9
Explicit Guidance	7	3
Tacit Guidance	9	3
Distal Arrangement	1	1
Inter-generational Directions	1	1
No Sharing Practices	7	12

Table 1: Frequency of reported practice.

The analysis of the types of guidance which parents offer collectively and, significantly, separately, point to the 'investment' (resources; time; emotional; intimacy) that parents (in the main, mothers) continue to provide their sons. Most particularly, many mothers in this cohort appeared to take direct responsibility for their son's reading. This was either something they claimed; something they saw as an important aspect of mutuality; a responsibility that was attributed to them in their role as mother; or a role they viewed as central to nurturing. As such, these mothers continued to play a fundamental role in guiding the boys into the various "societal institutions and technologies" (Rogoff et al 1993 p 8) central to their lives. This portrait of mothers, however, contrasts in interesting ways to the boys' reports of the increasing importance of their fathers as role models for their reading practices (Hamston and Love 2000; Love and Hamston 2001).

CONCLUSION

Our study confirms the powerful influence of parents in guiding children into valued discourses of literacy (Heath 1983; Wells 1986; see Rogoff 1995; Rogoff et al 1993). Significantly, however, it highlights how these boys have continued to appropriate these valued discourses in their day-to-day lives. These boys have developed a sophisticated set of reading practices and discursive resources that they are able and willing to exchange in

the social contexts where such practices and discourses are valued (see Luke 2000). Through their enculturation into literacy practices in the home, and the continued guidance provided to them, these boys have crafted their enculturation into practices that suit them (see Heath in Rogoff et al 1993).

Further, our study names the kinds of things that parents do to maintain their sons' literacy practices in the home. Importantly, it points to adolescence as a time where boys such as these still require and, importantly, accept, the interpersonal relationships that their parents endeavour to maintain around reading.

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